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Friendship: A Pessimist Ponders Her Optimist Trail Partner

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Friendship

A pessimist ponders her optimist trail partner

Elissa Ely



MY FRIEND AND I HAVE CLIMBED MANY MOUNTAINS TOGETHER. The first was our medical internship, a hike not recommended for the unconditioned. It's like being pushed from a bush plane onto some Himalayan summit holding a stethoscope—a trip I want never to repeat. Yet we first met there in the thicket of renal equations and blood clots. That New Year's Eve at midnight, we drank champagne out of urine sample cups between beeper calls. Those were moments of respite in an arduous trek.

Neither of us had climbed a true mountain, the type made of rock and dirt. We decided to tackle one the following summer, before medical residency began. Surviving the slopes of internship creates a strange sense of immortality, and a few vertical feet after a year of Himalayan effort would be just a gentle hop.

We picked Mount Moosilauke, tenth highest of the 4,000-footers in New Hampshire's White Mountains. The name was friendly, even evocative; a character from television childhood peeked out of the first syllable with oversized antlers and a gentle foolish face. We had no idea what 4,803 feet meant in actual distance. Why, it's less than a mile.

Halfway up the Gorge Brook Trail, staggering in surprise, it became perfectly clear to me I could not continue. No stethoscope would help this virgin hiker—flabby, breathless, worn from a year of under-sleeping. Here walked an essential pessimist. I knew the weather was about to turn; rain was coming, most likely a downpour. The forecast was as clear as looking up: a simple diagnosis, a simple treatment. We needed to head down immediately. The mountain was too much.

You can hike and hike for years (as eventually we did) and learn only one thing, but it's imperative: Wherever you climb, your essential temperament climbs with you. It can't be locked in the car at the trailhead, though that would be a relief. I saw nothing but clouds above us, yet my friend saw nothing but sun ready to burst through. She was just as fitness-deprived and exhausted, but she had no doubt that she would make it to the summit and would take me with her. It was going to be glorious up there, and the sky was going to hold. We would go forward.

If by nature you live under a cloud, finding someone who lives under the sun is a refreshing, contrary experience. A series of stone steps had been placed just for us by invisible young trail makers—miracle workers—generations ago.

Mount Moosilauke, the peak two friends picked for their first shared hike three decades ago. DEBRA BENWELL

We came at last to the top, except it wasn't. We had picked a first mountain with a false summit. Of course: nothing but a gloomy weather report. Misery ahead.

Four thousand eight hundred and three feet might have been the distance between Massachusetts and New Hampshire for the time it seemed to take. But our first true summit was glorious when we finally found it. Wind blew. Sandwiches were squashed and tasty. The truly immortal world spread out below. It was just as the sunny one of us had predicted.

We lingered in the remnants of an old hotel for a while, out of the wind. The return plan, in my view, was simple: limp down, get a shower, get a meal, get a bed. My friend looked at her watch.

—You know, she said, thoughtfully, we have a couple of hours before dinnertime. There's a little side trail I think I noticed near the bottom.

IT HAS BEEN ALMOST 30 YEARS NOW. WE STILL CLIMB MOUNTAINS, though not as often. Those injuries that seem routine when your parents and friends suffer them become uniquely devastating when they happen to you. These injuries have begun, and though they are in no way medically fatal, they feel a little spiritually terminal. I view them with discouragement. Essential temperament does not change much.

My friend sees things differently. —There will be other opportunities, she says, opening a guidebook. We'll start looking immediately.

She knows good times are ahead for the both of us, for everyone else she cares about, and for the world in all its difficulties. Bless her; she is like that.

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